

welcome

Not Empty Yet

My older son recently started his third year of college, the younger his third year of high school. This leaves me listening to the ticktock of some other sort of biological clock, one that isn't inside me warning me to make babies, but one that has come sneaking into my life, slithering through the quiet days like Captain Hook's crocodile, warning me to let go of my babies. The imminent Empty Nest.

I have left the older son's room exactly as it was when he went away to school. No, not exactly. I cleaned up, I straightened bookshelves, I arranged the furniture. And I removed the musty clothes that got wedged behind the bureau collecting dust. But my son's room is intact. It even smells the way it did when he lived there, as if his fragrance had imbued the very furniture and carpet. Sometimes I sit quietly and breathe deeply—but not too often. I don't want my heart to break.

I am clearly not one of those parents who can't wait to get her hands on a bit more real estate, ready to convert a child's room into a den, or a library, or a guest room, or, as I recently read, an enormous bathroom. I don't need any other rooms. (Though I do have a fantasy of someday having a room dedicated to massage. I saw such a room in a large house in France years ago; it took my breath away, the sheer, unencumbered audacity of devoting square footage to that kind of pleasure. I've never had such a response to meditation rooms, or yoga studios. It must have to do with the sybaritic nature of the room's purpose. The image has stayed with me. The walls were washed in a thin, airy white paint; even the floorboards were painted white. There was a professional, cushioned, wooden massage table, draped in a thick white linen sheet, in the middle of the room; against the wall stood a small cabinet that held fluffy white towels and crisply ironed white sheets. On top was a candle.)

Is my son's room a shrine? The boys have much to say about holding on to their rooms; they're in favor of the idea. They need a place to visit when they come home. They need a place to keep their treasures. They need the peace and quiet of my house; their father now has two infants and his house is happy but noisy. Every once in a while a son will bring over, for safekeeping, the remains of some valuable item wrested from the jaws of a 2-year-old.

My sons love visiting their father's parents' home in New Orleans, where, until five years ago, his bedroom was

intact, and full of the toys, trinkets, and papers of his childhood. They would spend hours riffling through drawers, discovering, inspecting, quizzing. I did the same thing for years at my own childhood home, until my bedroom was turned into a guest room. (It is interesting to think about the moment when a child becomes a guest. Who decides? How?) I would find clothes that I remembered buying: the first scarf I ever bought to wear as a headband (an Echo scarf, of course); chain-link belts still looped into my bell-bottoms; a tarnished silver ID bracelet (oh, Ricky, I guess you know by now that we broke up, and if you want it back . . .); patent leather platform shoes I could never walk in; letters from camp friends, the envelopes decorated in brightly colored inks, the letter "i" always capped with a flower or a heart. (There's the sort of archaeological find that will no longer be possible for the next generation—lost to e-mails. But perhaps it is best not to wax nostalgic for bold calligraphy in silver ink on black paper.)

Speaking of ID bracelets, one of the best parts of going through old drawers with your children is the chance to prove to them that you were once a child, once silly, once funny, once romantic. My sons cannot get enough of the stories about what we were like in junior high, what kind of trouble we got into, as if I would confess—but I'm happy to tell, for the twentieth time, about the time my sister burned a hole in the awning while she was hanging out her bedroom window with a cigarette. (That came up when we found the red plastic Bic lighter.)

When my sons' New Orleans grandfather remarried, the rooms were cleaned out, and all the debris of childhood was thrown away. The boys were in high dudgeon for weeks, outraged that they had not been consulted, indignant at the waste of such fascinating stuff, and mournful about its absence. All the glimpses into their father's childhood, all the possibilities for putting together a picture of what he was like at their age, all the rock collections and jacks and chewed-up pencils and spools of typewriter ribbon, gone.

I don't think of myself as worshipping the past in my son's room. But I do think the room is holding a place. It contains the possibility that he will return, if only for a week, perhaps even when he has a home of his own. As my guest, of course.



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